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Book Reviews

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Review of *After Art* by David Joselit (Princeton)

Lindsay Garcia

ABSTRACT David Joselit's slim volume "After Art" offers multiple intriguing frameworks to analyze art in the present-day globalized art world. *After Art* backs away from the traditional approach of artist intent and production and looks at what happens to images once they are attached to the networks that circulate them. Instead of proselytizing individual or even original artworks, Joselit champions images that are constantly reproduced and remediated by artists and architects such as Tania Bruguera, Ai Weiwei, Sherrie Levine, Matthew Barney, Le Corbusier, and Rem Koolhaas.

After Art. By David Joselit. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012, 136pp. (Hardcover) ISBN 1400845149. US List: \$25.00

David Joselit's slim volume *After Art* offers multiple intriguing frameworks to analyze art in the present-day globalized art world. *After Art* backs away from the traditional approach of artist intent and production and looks at what happens to images once they are attached to the networks that circulate them. Instead of proselytizing individual or even original artworks, Joselit champions images that are constantly reproduced and remediated by artists and architects such as Tania Bruguera, Ai Weiwei, Sherrie Levine, Matthew Barney, Le Corbusier, and Rem Koolhaas. In many respects a sequel to Joselit's 2007 book, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*, the collection of essays at hand was developed out of a series of three lectures entitled "States of Form" delivered at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University in 2010. *After Art* is fast-paced and deploys numerous theoretical concepts in rapid succession to convincingly articulate Joselit's main argument: "images produce power" (xvi) by circulating like currency. Joselit shows how instead of being "discrete objects" (94), images engage in socio-political issues by way of traveling across networks. The more nodes the images connect to, the more power they have. According to Joselit, we should seek out ways to harness this power "affirmatively (and aggressively) rather than negatively or with shame" (93).

After Art comes at a time when history of capitalism has become an emergent field in the humanities.¹ While there are some examples of capitalist exploration in art and architectural history and criticism, such as Pamela Lee's book *Forgetting the Art World* (2012), which explores the globalization, movement, and migration of art, and work by architectural scholars such as Peggy Deamer, *After Art* presents some of the first economically-inclined frameworks for articulating how images exist in the present day. Joselit's interdisciplinary book also engages in a number of smaller conversations with mobility studies, critical Internet studies, numismatics, cultural diplomacy, democracy, the commons, and museum studies.

Joselit's engagement with these larger conversations about economics and globalization contribute to his supposition that, despite popular opinion, images are not "derivative",

“dumb,” or “deceptive” (xiii-xvi); instead, they “possess vast power through their capacity for replication, remediation, and dissemination at variable velocities” (xiv). The word *image* replaces *art* and is defined as “a quantum of visual content...that can assume a variety of formats” (xv). Essentially, the quality, medium, and scale of an image can change, and images can be remediated and reproduced ad infinitum. Joselit finds the analytic of *medium* to be outdated and instead uses *format*, for each image can embody a number of different formats that “establish a pattern of links or connections” (55) in its lifetime through the networks of contemporary culture, economics, and politics.

Joselit’s claim that formats build connections leads him to specify how art builds international diplomacy, by setting up the dialectic between the neoliberal and the fundamentalist view, a political conflict that is furthered by the globalized art trade. The neoliberal side represents the free market approach, epitomized by events such as Art Basel, which aim to create art as a form of currency, or a universal that can transverse borders and cultures with ease. In contrast, the fundamentalist approach calls for art and architecture to be “rooted to a specific place” (3) such that art and architecture belong to a particular location usually where birthed. Such a dialectic is set up to move to a discussion of the informational versus the aesthetic value of an art object. Ultimately, Joselit rejects fundamentalism all together when he writes that “it is saturation through mass circulation—the status of being *everywhere at once* rather than belonging to a single place—that now produces value for and through images” (16).²

A heavy critique of museums pervades the text. Museums stockpile artworks and accumulate funds from trustees and donors. Joselit goes so far as to call this practice “a massive money laundering operation” (71). He also critiques museums for attempting to produce an image of diversity and multiplicity while at the same time branding themselves with one image, like the Guggenheim Bilbao. The author’s solution to these issues is *global image justice*, which means “making cultural politics a serious dimension of foreign policy” (21) and “redistribut[ing] *image* wealth” (23). One especially controversial claim is his request for European and other Western foreign ministries to give grants to the Global South to build modern cultural infrastructures that allow for the transmission of art and cultural objects from the Western world to the developing world. Joselit sees this as a democratization of images, but does not consider the more troubling aspects of this process that are rooted in cultural colonialism, homogenization, and Western exceptionalism.

Joselit also discusses at length his catch phrase “Epistemology of Search,” which is a way for an artwork to create value based on its “searchability” (58), connectivity, and ability to reaggregate and connect to other information and social forces. Joselit argues that original art doesn’t exist anymore. Instead, art is made through “reframing, capturing, reiterating, and documenting” (56) based on the “aesthetics of the search engine” (58). The book provides examples of architectural spaces and works of art that expose figure-ground relationships, fold content into formal structures, and connect to networks. He sees this new analytical toolkit as a shift in methodological approach from “object-based aesthetics” to “networks aesthetics premised on the emergence of form from populations of images” (43). Instead of tapping into traditional analytical approaches, Joselit does not believe in assigning meaning to art at all because it gives value to the work and enhances its ability to become a commodity on the free market.

The theories and information provided in this book will be useful to those interested in developing new methodological approaches to art history, media studies, and visual culture as well as advertisers, marketers, activists, and artists who intend to bring powerful messages using images to a large number of viewers through social, economic, and political networks. I find it rather strange, however, that a book that is calling for the

“reframing, capturing, reiterating, and documenting” of images and an Epistemology of Search has chosen to present itself in the most traditional of all formats: the book. While undoubtedly, a book connects to a multiplicity of networks, spectators, and socio-political forces, it is surprising that there is no interactive, creative online version of this text which could aggregate the information provided into various formats, configurations, and linked connections. Perhaps this is a project for emerging scholars who wish to take on a digital humanities project in Scalar or another tool.

Notes

1. Some recent examples of scholars who engage with the discourses of capitalism include historians, theorists, and activists, such as: Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage, 2015); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2013) Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); Sarah Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22.2 (2004):117-139. [↗](#)
2. Joselit developed this concept based on John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff’s term “ethno-commodities.” John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009): 20. This omnipresent quality of images is what Joselit terms “buzz” (16). [↗](#)

Bio



Lindsay Garcia

Lindsay Garcia is a video, performance, and social practice artist as well as a PhD Candidate in American Studies and an Equality Lab Fellow at the College of William & Mary. Her artwork thematically engages with queer intersectional feminism, politics and current events, nonhuman animals and nature, human structures, and waste. Her dissertation explores how border and boundary crossings of pest animals and pesticides reveal issues of environmental justice from a queer, posthumanist, visual studies perspective. Garcia received a BFA in Sculpture from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), an MFA in Interdisciplinary Visual Arts from SUNY Purchase, an MA in Contemporary Art from Sotheby’s Institute of Art, and an MA in American Studies from the College of William and Mary in 2016. Her MA Thesis “Capitalist Architecture in a Posthumanist World” won the Arts and Sciences Distinguished Thesis Award in the Humanities at the College of William & Mary. At SUNY Purchase, she won the Outstanding MFA Award, and at RISD, she won the Senior Sculpture Prize. Garcia has exhibited her artwork in New York (NY), Philadelphia (PA), Washington, D.C., San Jose (CA), Richmond (VA), Providence (RI), Wooster (OH), Torrington (CT), and Bergen (NJ). Garcia has published in *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* and *Lateral*.



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